

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 27, Number 6

February 6, 2011



A Godly Example: Charity

Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. (1 Timothy 4:12, KJV 1900)

"Charity" has undergone incredible redefinition through its long history. Today we think of charity in terms of giving to non-profit benevolent organizations or as a deduction from our taxable income on April 15. What did it mean in 1611 when the King James translators used it in their translation of the Bible into the English language? What did the first century Greek word that it translated mean? How are we in our time to fulfill Paul's teaching?

The basic word in first century Greek language and culture had to do with a very special kind of love between people, something far deeper than friendship or like-mindedness. At times we may impose too much distinction between the various words used in the first century for our present concept of love.¹

Though the meanings of these terms overlap considerably in many contexts, there are probably some significant differences in certain contexts; that is to say, φιλέω and φιλία are likely to focus upon love or affection based upon interpersonal association, while ἀγαπάω and ἀγάπη focus upon love and affection based on deep appreciation and high regard. On the basis of this type of distinction, one can understand some of the reasons for the use of ἀγαπάω and ἀγάπη in commands to Christians to love one another. It would, however, be quite wrong to assume that φιλέω and φιλία refer only to human love, while ἀγαπάω and ἀγάπη refer to divine love. Both sets of terms are used for the total range of loving relations between people, between people and God, and between God and Jesus Christ.² (The characters you don't recognize in this quote are the primary Greek words used for "love" in the New Testament)

Love, affectionate regard, goodwill, benevolence. With reference to God's love, it is

¹ Oxford English Dictionary of the English language defines "charity" in similarly broad terms to the first century Greek definitions listed here.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., 293 (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

God's willful direction toward man. It involves God doing what He knows is best for man and not necessarily what man desires.³

It seems then that the words in first century Greek culture also covered a broad area of meaning. Two excerpts from these definitions highlight the core of Paul's teaching in our study verse.

1. ...love and affection based on deep appreciation and high regard.
2. ...It involves God doing what He knows is best for man and not necessarily what man desires.

A preacher who does not respect, appreciate, and highly regard the congregation to whom he preaches is a disaster. A preacher who does not care enough for those people to teach and to do for them what he knows is best for them and not necessarily what they desire is also a disaster. Paul commanded Timothy in his pastoral labors and preaching to practice this wise and courageous kind of ministry.

I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. (2 Timothy 4:1-4, KJV 1900)

Sadly, far too many pulpits in conservative denominations and/or fellowships of our day are filled with marketing specialists, trained to give the people what they want, not at all what they need. Hearing one of these men preach leaves you feeling as if you just attended a marketing seminar, not a worship service. Is it any wonder that such men occasionally leave the ministry and make good money in pyramid selling schemes?

³Zodhiates, S. (2000, c1992, c1993). *The complete word study dictionary : New Testament* (electronic ed.) (G26). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

Both the pulpit and the pew of many churches have been compromised with this “seeker-sensitive” kind of human motivational teaching instead of sound and substantive Biblical instruction. Biblical preaching is not a smooth sales pitch. Rather it requires the man in the pulpit to “...reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.” The word translated “exhort” means to call a person alongside you, to lead by example. To reprove and to rebuke requires the man in the pulpit to point out errors and failures in the lives of people in the pew. The measure of error or failure must be Scripture and not the preacher’s personal opinion or the popular fads of the day.

To reprove in this sense means to convince and to convict. It means pointing out the errors in people’s lives, but doing so in a way that appeals to their own conscience, their sense of right and wrong. Far too many preachers use long, pointy fingers and an overload of guilt to control the way people act. This attitude involves the preacher forcing his views onto the people, not cultivating their own internal moral compass, reinforced by Scripture.

To rebuke as the word is used in this passage requires the forbidding of certain attitudes and behaviors, confronting them when they appear. The mature spiritual attitude in the pew that responds to this kind of Biblical preaching acknowledges one’s sins and aggressively seeks to repent of them. When too much sinful pride walks into the pulpit with the preacher or sits smugly beside the people in the pew, this kind of preaching will be despised.

For Timothy, or for a preacher in our day, to be a godly example in charity requires that the man preach to the people from an attitude of true appreciation and respect for the people, not from the sales manager’s perspective of motivating the people to do what makes him look good. It demands that he love them enough to teach them, and to lead them by his personal example, in actions that honor God and pursue what is right before God, not what the people desire.

Given the sad compromise in so many churches of our time, is it any surprise that churches under this kind of influence become confused regarding their role, often investing more of their time and energy in national and local politics than in serving God? If they cannot see the New Testament vision of a God-centered church through the charade of marketeering preachers and motivational sermonettes, they can see little or no difference between the political scene of the day and the church culture of the day.

For the preacher to “exhort” requires that he show by example the right attitude and conduct that the New Testament affirms for the Lord’s church, “...pillar and ground of the truth...” not pillar and ground of national politics. Occasionally I observe church members engaging in rather intense political discussions. If they take notice, they will observe

that I become rather quiet during such discussions. Political discussions can be entertaining and even thought-provoking, but they quite often are also divisive. Shame on any preacher or church that become so polarized toward one political party, that church members who belong to the opposite political party feel self-conscious and unsafe to express their ideas.

If the Bible has become empty or anemic of worthwhile topics, relevant and vibrant to the Christian life of our day, perhaps politics would be as good a discussion theme as any other. But if the Bible still is indeed relevant to our lives, and if we have not uncovered all of its counsel to our needs, should we not invest our time and emotional energy seeking Biblical answers for our needs?

No, this theme will not be very popular in our time and culture, but isn’t Paul’s point that the example of charity teaches and exemplifies to people what they need, not what they desire?

Our country has been supremely blessed. Because a growing number of individual Christians have forsaken Biblical Christianity—and not exclusively because of institutional failure or corruption at the top of the political processes—the days of such blessings for our country and culture seem sadly remote. However, the solution, the road back to blessings does not lie in the successes of one political party over the other. For that matter, it does not lie in the political process at all. It lies in the godly determination of faithful Christians to live more of their faith than they presently practice. Our country is not a cosmic, pseudo-church, nor is it a new Canaan’s Promised Land. It is a country. Our one and only hope for national blessings lies in godly people dedicating their lives and energies to serving God, to their following the example of the New Testament’s teachings, not to their viewing their church life much like a convenient and entertaining hobby.

One of the most basic of the New Testament’s teachings requires faithful attendance at our church’s regular gatherings for worship and fellowship.

Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. (Hebrews 10:25, KJV 1900)

In context the “willful” sin of Verse twenty six in all likelihood refers to our being absent from our church’s assembly when it gathers. We know what Verse twenty five says, and it says it quite clearly. Why did Paul use “forsaking” to describe failure to attend the assembly of the church? Can you “forsake” someone or some conviction and not know it? Thus any rationalization we offer to justify our not meeting with our church when it gathers becomes a knowing, willful sin.

Paul instructs Timothy to be an example to the church that he serves. What attitude does your pastor demonstrate toward attendance at your church's services, every service? What would happen to the pews if every member followed that example? Let's reverse roles for a moment. What would happen in your church if your pastor followed the example of many members?

I will offer three examples that likely at times fit many, if not most, churches. How would you react, if at the end of next Sunday's service your pastor announced, "I have a social obligation next Sunday, so I won't be here. I'll be with you in spirit, and I hope you have a good service. See you in two weeks." Or perhaps he might announce, "There is a really good meeting scheduled at a church in another part of the country, and a really good preacher, one of my favorites, is the invited preacher, so I'll be attending that meeting next Sunday. Hope you have a good service here. See you in two weeks." Or, worse yet, how would you react to no announcement at all from your pastor? You show up on Sunday morning, hungry and in need of Bible preaching, and the preacher just doesn't show up. What is an example? Is it something to be ignored? Is it something that we may view as optional or only to be followed when it is convenient for us to do so? Or is it something that is right, something that we are obligated to God to follow? The fact that the pastor has a clear obligation that he is commanded in Scripture to fulfill faithfully is only half the Bible story for a faithful New Testament church. Doesn't Scripture equally teach that every member also has a clear obligation that only that member can fulfill in the church? Read First Corinthians Chapter Twelve several times over. Can a body function with good health and balance when some of its members are literally absent? Every member, according to Paul's teaching in that chapter fills a vital and necessary function, one that they can only fill by being present and active in the church's regular gatherings, all of them.

Is this a popular point to teach in today's culture? No, but it is a Biblical point that needs to be made regularly. We can't minister to our brothers and sisters in our church when we are not present. And both they and we need that ministry regularly. The very Sunday you choose to be absent, regardless of the reason, might be the very day someone in your church desperately needs you and the ministry that you alone can give to him/her. Will you be there to minister? Will you follow or ignore the example?

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor